Proceedings of ICEIPI 2025 Symposium: AI Am Ready: Artificial Intelligence as Pedagogical Scaffold
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25652

The Impact of Adult Role Failure on Adolescent Mental Health and Intervention Strategies

Danshu Fu

No. 20th School, Shenyang, China
fudanshu1123@163.com

Abstract. In recent years, rising concerns over adolescent mental health have underscored the vital role of supportive adults in their psychological development. Yet rapid shifts in family structure, excessive educational pressure, and broader socio-cultural transformation have repeatedly undermined these adult functions, turning adult-role failure into a major risk factor for adolescent distress. This study examines the mechanisms through which adult roles shape adolescent psychology and analyses how the absence or malfunction of these roles affects mental-health outcomes. Using the 2019 Chinese urban family drama A Little Reunion as a case study, we conduct a close textual analysis of the character Qiao Yingzi's psychological trajectory. Based on developmental theories such as Erikson's psychosocial stages, attachment theory, and Bandura's self-efficacy, and supported by social-context analysis, familial, school-based, and societal causes of adult-role failure are identified. The results show that effective adult roles, such as authoritative parenting and teachers' positive feedback, greatly enhance adolescents' self-efficacy and emotion regulation. In contrast, parental over-control or neglect and misaligned teacher roles foster insecure attachment, identity confusion, and heightened risks of depression, insomnia, and suicidal ideation. The study further demonstrates that programs such as the Triple P-Positive Parenting Program, MindMatters, group therapy, and advocacy can restore adult-support system and safeguard adolescent mental health.

Keywords: Adult roles, Adolescent mental health, Attachment theory, Educational pressure, Family structure

1. Introduction

In psychological research, the influence of adult roles on adolescent mental health has long been a central topic. While adolescent well-being is shaped by multiple factors, the failure of adult roles is widely recognized as one of the most critical risk elements. Existing studies mainly focus on parents and teachers, often neglecting other types of adult roles.In reality, adult-role failure is complex, as the breakdown of one role can set off a chain reaction that disrupts other adult responsibilities essential to adolescent development. Nevertheless, interventions targeting these complex dynamics remain underdeveloped. Meanwhile, ongoing changes in social structures have further complicated the functionality of adult roles. And shifts in family structure, increasing academic pressure, and the erosion of community support systems have collectively undermined adults' ability to offer stable

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25652

emotional and psychological support. As a result, many adolescents grow up in environments where adult involvement is either absent, inappropriate, or detrimental, thus severely compromising their psychological development. Against this backdrop, this study takes the urban family drama A Little Reunion as a case to examine the psychological consequences of adult-role failure in adolescent development. Focusing on the character arc of Qiao Yingzi, the paper draws on key developmental theories such as Erikson's psychosocial stages, attachment theory, and Bandura's self-efficacy. By incorporating social-contextual analysis, it examines how adult interactions influence adolescent mental health and highlights the need for context-sensitive, systematic interventions to rebuild adult support systems and promote psychological resilience in youth.

2. Related theoretical foundations and case exploration

2.1. Definition and mechanisms of adult roles

The roles of adults involve offering essential support, guidance, and care that significantly impact adolescent development. These include guardians such as parents who offer emotional and material support, educators like teachers who guide adolescents and help shape their values, and community adults such as coaches or mentors who serve as role models and help foster a sense of belonging. Regarding their mechanisms of influence, Erikson's psychosocial theory highlights the stage of identity versus role confusion as the core developmental task during adolescence. At this stage, adult roles, particularly that of teachers, are crucial in shaping adolescents' sense of identity. As adolescents spend the majority of their time in school, teachers contribute to cultivating their sense of competence via acknowledgment and feedback on participation, academic progress, and growth.

2.2. Influence of adult roles on adolescents' psychology

The positive psychological development of adolescents largely depends on the effective support and guidance provided by adults. Research indicates that when a trusted individual expresses confidence in a young person's abilities, it enhances their self-efficacy, motivating them to persist and actively face challenges even in the presence of setbacks [1]. The perception of parents and teachers as trustworthy by adolescents makes them more inclined to embrace positive feedback, aiding in the development of a secure self-concept. The support provided by reliable adults not only improves adolescents' ability to regulate emotions but also nurtures their self-esteem, confidence, and sense of belonging. These positive experiences build resilience and underpin long-term mental health [2]. Within family settings, authoritative parenting is viewed as a particularly supportive approach that demonstrates effective adult role fulfillment. This approach combines clear expectations and rules with emotional sensitivity, promoting independence within a safe emotional setting. Prior research has indicated that adolescents raised in such environments typically exhibit stronger responsibility, self-regulation, and positive social behaviors, alongside better emotional well-being and academic performance [3,4]. As such, the effective performance of adult roles is a key factor in promoting adolescent mental health. Through emotional support, value guidance, and behavioral modeling, adults profoundly influence adolescents' psychological development and contribute to their stability and protection during critical growth periods.

2.3. Overview of the case study: a little reunion

To investigate the link between adult role performance and adolescent mental health, the paper analyzes a case from the 2019 Chinese urban family drama A Little Reunion. Focusing on three

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25652

families whose children are preparing for the Gaokao, the series explores the academic, emotional, and relational tensions that accompany this high-stakes examination. Among them, the experience of Qiao Yingzi stands out as a representative case of adolescent psychological distress resulting from adult role failure, making it particularly relevant for this study.

Portrayed as a diligent and high-performing student, Qiao demonstrates a deep personal interest in the field of astronomy. However, her development is hindered by dysfunction in both parental roles. Her mother exercises excessive control over her academic and personal life, disregarding her need for autonomy and emotional expression. In contrast, her father remains emotionally distant and uninvolved, showing little concern for her psychological well-being. The combined dynamic of maternal over-control and paternal neglect results in a failure to meet the adolescent's fundamental psychological needs, including emotional support, autonomy, and belongingness, thereby creating a high-risk context for the emergence of depressive symptoms. From a developmental psychology view, this case highlights the vital role of adult support during Erikson's "identity vs. role confusion" stage [5]. Parental failure disrupts Qiao's identity formation and diminishes her self-efficacy. Though the parents eventually acknowledge their faults and allow Qiao more autonomy, her experience underscores the lasting impact of adult role failure on adolescent mental health, offering key insights into this critical developmental stage.

3. Underlying factors of adult role failure in adolescent psychological development

3.1. Urbanization and the erosion of parental roles

The pressures of rapid urbanization have redefined family roles, as rising workloads and life stress limit parents' capacity to engage meaningfully with their children. Thus, even co-residing families may experience emotional disconnection, diminished interaction quality, and neglect of children's psychological needs [4]. Unlike physical absence, this decline in parental function reflects reduced quality in education, companionship, and emotional support. As adolescents undergo individuation and socialization, developmental psychology highlights the importance of stable family support for adolescents. Parents, in this context, serve not only as caregivers but also as central agents in value formation, emotional regulation, and the internalization of social norms. In families driven by performance pressures and lacking emotional intimacy, adolescents may experience "emotional absence despite physical presence," a dynamic that disrupts identity formation, emotional regulation, and psychological resilience [6]. For instance, Qiao Yingzi appears to live in an intact family, with both parents present and the household materially secure. However, under the guise of "efficient companionship," her mother imposes a goal-oriented, managerial style of educational control. The father, though physically present at home, is introverted and withdrawn from his parental role, staying on the family's sidelines with minimal emotional involvement or guidance. And this dual pattern of "parental presence but emotional absence" leaves the adolescent without an effective psychological buffer when confronted with stress. Faced with her mother's high expectations and lack of emotional understanding, Qiao gradually suppresses her feelings and adopts avoidant coping strategies, which eventually lead to significant psychological distress. This case highlights the profound impact of diminished parental roles on adolescent mental health. Therefore, understanding parental role attenuation requires looking beyond mere physical presence to emphasize functional and psychological engagement. Based on this view, rebuilding an effective parent-child relationship depends on improving parents' sensitivity, responsiveness, and emotional availability in daily interactions, so adolescents consistently receive psychological support within a changing social environment.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25652

3.2. Family structural changes and emotional insecurity in adolescents

Family structure changes, if not accompanied by sufficient support mechanisms, can lead to a loss of emotional security and a reduced sense of belonging in adolescents. Previous studies have found that structural changes in the family, such as parental separation or divorce, can lead to increased difficulties in emotional regulation and social identity development among adolescents, with girls tending to show greater emotional sensitivity [7]. And this does not suggest that all single-parent or blended families harm adolescent development; rather, without consistent emotional support, the potential risks tend to rise. Supportive relationships with extended family or trusted adults can help buffer these effects and promote emotional resilience. For example, Qiao is raised in a divorced family. Although her parents ensure financial stability, their relationship is marked by persistent conflict, emotional distance, and a lack of mutual understanding. Under mounting academic and interpersonal pressure, the family fails to provide timely and adequate emotional support, leaving Qiao to internalize stress and anxiety. Over time, this emotional void contributes to her growing psychological distress. This case illustrates that it is not the family structure itself that poses the greatest risk, but rather the breakdown of emotional continuity and the absence of consistent, empathetic communication between parents and children during and after structural transitions.

3.3. Institutional constraints on teachers' supportive functions

Teachers play an important role not only in academic guidance but also in providing psychological support during adolescent development. However, the current education system, which prioritizes exam performance, imposes certain limitations on teachers' ability to offer psychological support. In Chinese middle schools, large class sizes and heavy teaching workloads are common. Besides lesson preparation and instruction, teachers are also responsible for administrative tasks and data reporting, which consume a significant amount of their time and energy [8,9]. This heavy workload limits teachers' ability to adequately address and support students' individual mental health needs. In addition, influenced by traditional cultural respect for teacher authority, students are less likely to proactively express psychological difficulties or seek help, which increases the challenge for teachers to identify and intervene in students' mental health issues [2]. In this context, teachers tend to focus more on academic guidance and improving students' grades, resulting in limited capacity for psychological support. For example, in A Little Reunion, though Qiao's homeroom teacher and subject teachers are diligent and responsible, the large class sizes and heavy teaching workload prevent them from fully understanding her inner stress and emotional fluctuations, preventing timely detection and intervention of her mental health problems. Due to the weakened parental roles, Qiao lacks emotional support at home, and while school is an important environment for her development that should provide psychological support, institutional and resource limitations have constrained this role, further exacerbating her mental health risks. The institutional limitations on teachers' psychological support roles within the current education system have constrained their ability to protect adolescent mental health. In the future, policy reforms should be implemented to reduce teachers' workload, enhance mental health education and training, and establish professional counseling services, thus improving teachers' ability to identify and address students' psychological issues and enabling schools to serve as essential support networks for adolescent mental health.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25652

4. Consequences of adult role failure and intervention measures

4.1. Impacts of adult role failure on adolescent mental health

Early childhood mental health is shaped by adult involvement, and attachment theory clarifies the lasting effects when this role is unfulfilled. Previous research shows consistent emotional support fosters secure attachment, promoting healthy self-perception and interpersonal trust in children [10]. Conversely, insufficient adult support can cause insecure attachment, thus harming children's future psychological development [10]. Furthermore, inconsistent or neglectful caregiving is a main cause of insecure attachment. Specifically, anxious attachment often arises from unpredictable caregiving, whereas avoidant attachment arises when caregivers ignore or reject the child's need for closeness, leading the child to perceive relationships as unreliable [11]. Besides, caregivers with unresolved trauma may exhibit frightened or frightening behaviors, which can lead to disorganized attachment. In this paradoxical dynamic, children seek comfort from the very source of fear. Consequently, such unhealthy attachment patterns greatly increase the risk of psychological problems in adolescence. These attachment types are closely associated with emotional dysregulation, low self-esteem, and even self-destructive behaviors. It is found that if psychological symptoms in adolescence remain unaddressed, they may develop into more severe disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive behaviors, eating disorders, or heightened risks of self-harm and suicide [12]. Thus, early emotional absence from adults leaves lasting effects on children's psychological development, increasing mental health risks in adolescence. This underscores the critical importance of providing stable and continuous emotional support during childhood.

4.2. Intervention measures and practical programs

To address the psychological risks of adult role failure, numerous evidence-based interventions have been developed to support adolescents and mitigate emotional and guidance deficits during development. These interventions primarily target two key domains, namely the family and the school, aiming to enhance adolescents' psychological resilience, promote emotional well-being, and provide alternative support systems. In the family domain, the Triple P-Positive Parenting Program provides parents with practical strategies to strengthen parent-child relationships, manage behavior, and prevent problems. Implemented in over 30 countries, it adapts to diverse cultures and family types. Its multilevel design supports both broad prevention and targeted help for high-risk families [13]. For example, at the school level, Australia's MindMatters initiative represents a systematic approach to promoting mental health within educational settings. Although precise impact measures are currently limited, the Australian Department of Health and Aged Care reports that the program helps foster more supportive school environments. Instead of targeting individual clinical treatment, MindMatters emphasizes community-wide benefits through a population-based intervention [14]. Research indicates that while individual outcomes may be difficult to quantify, improvements in overall school climate can significantly reduce mental health stigma, enhance help-seeking behavior, and facilitate early identification of emotional distress [15]. Therefore, these interventions form a multi-level framework addressing adolescent vulnerabilities by restoring protective supports lacking from failed adult roles.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25652

4.3. Policy recommendations and social support mechanisms

To further mitigate the long-term negative impacts of adult role failure on adolescent mental health, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive response system involving coordinated efforts from policymakers, social organizations, and public discourse. At the policy level, it is recommended to integrate emotional literacy and peer support groups into school curricula. Such group interventions can draw on principles of group psychotherapy, thus providing adolescents with cost-effective and scalable mental health support. The American Psychological Association (APA) states that group formats serve as support networks and emotional sounding boards, helping adolescents realize they "are not alone" and learn coping strategies from peers' experiences [16]. To avoid interference with academic activities, these programs should be scheduled during non-academic hours, creating a safe and open environment for emotional expression. In terms of social organizations, universities could partner with secondary schools to involve psychology students as volunteers under professional supervision. These volunteers can facilitate school-based mental health programs or lead emotional discussion sessions. This approach delivers psychological first aid to adolescents while providing psychology interns with practical training, cultivating future practitioners attuned to youth mental health. More broadly, public discourse must promote mental health destigmatization by avoiding sensationalism and stereotypes, instead highlighting stories of recovery and hope. For example, to foster acceptance and understanding of mental health, public campaigns and influencers should share authentic stories of recovery. By integrating resources across policy, education, and cultural domains, society can establish a comprehensive safety net to effectively mitigate the long-term risks caused by adult role failure.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the key role adults play in adolescent mental health development, particularly how the lack of emotional support increases the risk of psychological problems through insecure attachment patterns. However, the research primarily relies on literature reviews and case analyses, lacking large-scale empirical data, and the cases presented have certain limitations. Future efforts should focus on conducting empirical studies across diverse cultural contexts, improving teacher training and professional counseling systems, and promoting broader societal destigmatization of mental health along with the development of support networks to more effectively prevent and intervene in adolescent psychological issues.

References

[1] Lopez-Garrido, G. (2025). Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory of Motivation in Psychology. Simply Psychology. https: //www.simplypsychology.org/self-efficacy.html
[2] MindsAhead. (2022). Is supporting mental health really a teacher's job? https: //www.mindsahead.org.uk/is-supporting-mental-health-really-a-teachers-job/
[3] The Department of Health and Aged Care. (2014). Evaluation of Suicide Prevention Activities. https: //www1.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/suicide-prevention-activities-evaluation~positioning-the-nspp~mindmatters
[4] Castelli, L., & Marcionetti, J. (2024). Life satisfaction and school experience in adolescence: the impact of school supportiveness, peer belonging and the role of academic self-efficacy and victimization. Cogent Education, 11(1).
[5] Orenstein, G. and Lewis, L. (2022). Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development. National Library of Medicine; StatPearls Publishing.
[6] Sanvictores, T. and Mendez, M. (2022, September 18). Types of Parenting Styles and Effects on Children. National Library of Medicine; StatPearls Publishing.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25652

[7] Culpin, I., et al. (2022). Father absence and trajectories of offspring mental health across adolescence and young adulthood: Findings from a UK-birth cohort. Journal of Affective Disorders, 314(1), 150-159.
[8] Fabris, M.A., Lin, S. and Longobardi, C. (2023). A cross-cultural comparison of teacher-student relationship quality in Chinese and Italian teachers and students. Journal of School Psychology, 99, 101227.
[9] Kirkpatrick, R. and Zang, Y. (2011). The Negative Influences of Exam-Oriented Education on Chinese High School Students: Backwash from Classroom to Child. Language Testing in Asia, 1(3): 36-45.
[10] Cassidy, J., Jones, J.D. and Shaver, P. R. (2013). Contributions of attachment theory and research: A framework for future research, translation, and policy. Development and Psychopathology, 25(4 Pt 2): 1415-1434..
[11] Mcleod, S. (2024). Attachment Theory in Psychology. Simplypsychology.org; Simply Psychology. https: //www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html
[12] Kuehn. K.S., et al. (2022) A meta-analysis on the affect regulation function of real-time self-injurious thoughts and behaviours. Nat Hum Behav., 6(7): 964-974.
[13] Triple P. (2024). Triple P takes the guesswork out of parenting. https: //www.triplep.net/glo-en/home/
[14] Fischer, L., et al. (2023). Effectiveness of the holistic primary school-based intervention MindMatters: Study protocol for a cluster-randomised controlled trial. Trials, 24, 711.
[15] Podiya, J. K., Navaneetham, J. and Bhola, P. (2025). Influences of school climate on emotional health and academic achievement of school-going adolescents in India: A systematic review. BMC Public Health, 25, 54.
[16] American Psychological Association. (2019). Psychotherapy: Understanding Group Therapy. https: //www.apa.org/topics/psychotherapy/group-therapy